



Mrs.Sushree Mishra.
Programmer; Dept. of Comp.Sc,
Rama Devi Women's University
sushreemishra@rdwu.ac.in

Maa Rama Devi: A symbol of Women Empowerment

Sushree Mishra

Abstract:

At the turn of 20th century, a great soul took birth who grew up to be one of the most revered women of Odisha and very fondly called as Maa Rama Devi. Her life turned to be a torch bearer of the radical changes in the social status of people of Odisha at large. Abandoning warm lap of luxury and affluence at a very tender age Rama Devi engaged herself in the wave of freedom movement and empowering the weaker section of the society. Throughout her life she followed and propagated the principles of love, sacrifice, kindness, social services and reforms along with active participation in freedom movement. She demonstrated an exemplary life of multifaceted personality in spite of spending many days inside the jail during her struggle for freedom movement. There are numerous unfortunate incidents that took place to break her down and to distract her from goals, but she stood strong to face them boldly and patiently. Her perseverance towards achieving the goal left an indelible mark in the history of women. This paper, throws light into one of her most remembered and acclaimed achievement i.e. social reform and social service activities. This paper will discuss all the social reform activities undertaken by Maa Rama Devi and will attempt at unfolding the unknown facts of her life which contributed to the enhancement of self-esteem and self-respect of the women in Odisha. The paper also would contribute to the understanding of the contribution of Maa Rama Devi to the uplifting of the plight of deprived, with special reference to women of Odisha. The paper also seeks to motivate the younger and future generation of our state and well as country to adopt Maa Rama Devi's ideals for nation building and follow her legacy.

Key Words: Rama Devi, Woman in Indian freedom movement, Social Reformer, Sevaghar, Kasturi Ba Trust, Harijan Sevak Sangh, Asprushyata Nibarana Samiti, Utkal Khadi Mandal.

1. Introduction

Every nation is built up by the support of two pillars of its manpower- men and women. There are numerous examples where men segment sacrificed their lives for the freedom struggle, but it is well supported by some great women who actively took part in the freedom struggle and played a significant role in progress of the nation. Out of these great women, some women demonstrated extraordinary leadership by denouncing all the boundaries and left indelible footprints in the honour of the nation.

From the land of great Kalinga (Now state of Odisha), one such woman who not only inspired numerous other women by demonstrating extraordinary courage but also became a role model of service to mankind. Her exemplary role in the freedom struggle, stand her out as one of the most revered



freedom fighters among the women. She is very affectionately known as “Maa Rama Devi”, a bright star among women in Indian freedom struggle.

The paper is divided into four sections. In the first section it discusses her family and early life. Section-II introduces her role in pre independence era as a freedom fighter. Section-III introduces her as a social reformer and her selfless service to poor and destitute. Section-IV summarises her works, achievements and awards.

2. Role in Pre-Independence:

The symbol of self sacrifice, dedicated service, moral values, social reformer and great freedom fighter Maa Rama Devi took birth on 3rd December 1899 in a village named Satyabhamapur, in Cuttack district of Odisha to her proud parents Basanta Kumari Devi and Gopal Ballav Das. The first lawyer of Odisha , Utkal Gourav Madhusudan Das was her uncle(Elder brother of her father). She also had one sibling sister, named Uma. Both her parental and maternal family were from very rich and renowned background. Rama Devi's father Gopala Ballav Das always gave noble advices to her two daughters. He repeatedly advised two things: First 'Always speak truth', second 'Don't utter such words that hurt others' which had a deep impression on tender mind of Rama Devi. She followed these two things in her entire life which was reflected in her work. She was brought up amidst love, affection, luxury and affluence. She had a very early marriage in 1914 at a very young age of fifteen to Choudhury family. She married to Gopabandhu Choudhury who was Deputy Magistrate at Cuttack. Behind making Rama Devi a successful housewife, the role of her mother was crucial. She proved to be a very adorable daughter-in-law in Choudhury family. Without going to any school, Ramadevi mastered Odia, Sanskrit, Hindi and Bengali languages.

Rama Devi gave birth to her first child, son Manmohan Choudhury in 1915 and her daughter Annapurna Choudhury in 1917. She was too busy in upbringing of two children. But, that did not last for a long time. She did not believe in the notion of confining herself within the four walls of her in-laws. Rama Devi had quite a different perspective towards life. Seeing the hardships of the common people, she was driven by only one motive- to give selfless support and service to these people.

3. Rama Devi as a Freedom fighter:

Gopabandhu Choudhury was deputy collector of Cuttack till 1917 and was transferred to Bari in 1920 when it was affected by a very bad flood. Unable to give justice to the affected people under pressure of British govt. he decided to quit the job as advised by Rama Devi. He resigned and plunged into freedom movement. This was a golden chance for Rama Devi, a turning point of her life.

Getting out of the confines of her wifely duties, RamaDevi finally decided to start her journey through politics. Rama Devi and her husband together jumped to Indian independence movement in the year 1921. It was her husband, Gopabandhu Choudhury who stood like a pillar beside her, supporting her at every step.

Rama Devi was highly influenced by great leader of her time like Utkal Gaurav Madhusudan Das, Mahatma Gandhi, Vinoba Bhave, Jayprakash Narayanan, Sri Aurobinda. In 1921, Rama Devi had first interaction with Gandhiji along with her husband in his first visit to Odisha. In this first meeting with Gandhi, Rama Devi offered him a hand-woven cotton bundle which made him realise the extraordinary potential of the woman to fight off the Britishers. Ramadevi, who was present at the meeting, was impressed by Gandhiji's speech and started wearing khadi sarees and resolved to wear it for the rest of her life. They also joined the Indian National Congress in the same year. Both Gopabandhu Choudhury and Rama Devi took active participation in the Non Cooperation Movement. In 1930. She actively participated in Salt Satyagraha. She took great courage to visit Inchudi, Srijang, Jajpur, and Paradeep with other co-workers like Kiranbala Sen, Malti Devi, and Sarala Devi. She and her other co-workers were arrested and put in different jails by Britishers in 1930. She was put behind the bar several times in the years 1921, 1930, 1936 and 1942 along with her other independence activists like Malati Choudhury, Sarala Devi and many more. She joined 1931 INC session in Karachi. Though everything was going well, it was during August Revolution, 1942, the entire Choudhury family were arrested.

She took the leadership of women section during freedom struggle by demonstrating her extra ordinary capacity of organising and influencing women at large. After the independence, many public leaders became desperate for positions but, this patriotic family refrained from doing so and accepted public service as a religion.

4. Rama Devi as a Social Reformer and Activist:

During freedom movement, Rama Devi started her social reform and service activities. She was travelling and gathering women workers. Women from Odisha too jumped into action and joined the Independence Movement with outstanding courage and vigorous strength, abandoning all the luxuries and comforts of life. Rama Devi demonstrated her love for her country by donating her precious gold ornaments and many valuables to Gandhi's Swaraj Fund. She also took leadership among the women wing for preaching Gandhian philosophy like untouchability, cleaning, non-violence etc. In 1928, Rama Devi visited the Alaka Ashram near Jagatsingpur and engaged herself in many reform and social activities.

In 1932, she was released from Hazaribagh jail. Then she found herself actively involved in the service of Harijan welfare. Rama Devi started 'Asprushyata Nibarana Samiti' in Cuttack at the advice of Gandhiji



with an aim to eradicate untouchability. The same institution was renamed as 'Harijan Sevak Sangha' later. She was actively involved in programmes organized for Gandhi's visit during 1932 and 1934[10]. She also met Kasturba, Sardar Patel, Rajendra Prasad, Maulana Azad, Jawaharlal Nehru and others during this period. Gandhiji entrusted her to look after the Kasturba Trusts of Orissa Chapter after the death of Kasturba Gandhi.

From her childhood she was inspired by the Swadeshi Movement. She became campaigner, speaker, writer, organiser and worker who worked assiduously to elevate women and other deprived sections of humanity. Rama Devi was also involved in eliminating untouchability and both the children of Rama Devi had inter caste marriage which sent a positive signal against castes.

After the establishment of the 'Harijan Sevak Sangha', she started moving from village to village by foot to collect volunteers and contributions while she faced lots of obstacles and difficulties on her way. In the fear of police, people used to shut the door on her face. She was forced to take rest under the tree without food while travelling.

After her release, in 1935, Rama Devi was successful in establishing an ashram at Bari, which was named 'Sebaghar' by Gandhiji. The basic concept behind this ashram was that its residents would do a variety of works including Khadi promotion, the wakening of women in variety of issues, fundamental education, popularising the national language, providing services to Harijans, cleaning toilets, self help, adult education, Drug eradication and providing self-employment to common men via dairy development, leather works, bee keeping and rendering health services to patients, and earn for their livelihood. It was Rama's duty to supervise their work and look after the ashram as well.

Inspired by Acharya Vinoba Bhave, after the independence, Rama Devi dedicated her life to the cause of Bhoodan and Gramdan. She and her husband travelled bare foot around 4000 kilometres throughout the state to spread the message of donation of land to the oppressed and impoverished in 1952. On their way, they were also able to collect 1000 acres of land from people, which they later re-distributed among the landless people.

Rama Devi held a huge gathering in Bhubaneswar in support of Jayaprakashji to protect the standard of Indian democracy. The administration backtracked on seeing Rama Devi at the forefront of the gathering despite section 144 being imposed. Many leaders went to jail, but no one dared to arrest Maa Rama Devi.

Rama Devi became an active member of Utkal Khadi Mandal. Later on, she established a Teacher's Training Centre, started a Balwadi near Ramchandrapur. She also brought in the concept of Sishu



ViharYojana for the benefit of the children. She and her sister-in-law, Malati Devi went to different areas including Koraput, Balasore, Kendrapara, Cuttack, Dhenkanal, Mayurbhanj, and Phulbani, which were affected by natural calamities like famine, flood, and cyclone. They also took the help of unity movements. She also supported the movements organised by students.

She kept on moving from place to place and convinced people to treat the Harijans with equal respect and dignity. Mahatma Gandhi started the movement from Puri and Rama Devi too assisted him. When the INC finally conducted the meeting in the presence of Gandhiji, Rajendra Prasad, Maulana Azad, Kasturba, and Sardar Patel in Orissa, Rama Devi too collected money from people and made the meeting a huge success. During the famous war between India and China in 1962, Rama Devi along with several other women travelled to the places in border states in Assam and Mizoram (Gauhati, Tezpur, Bamdial, Diarang, Kachad etc) to give their selfless services to the soldiers[8].

In 1964, she actively worked on “Gramdan” project in different parts of Koraput district for upliftment of social and economic status of poor people. There was a communal riot in Rourkela in March, 1964 with loss of property and life. Maa Rama Devi, travelled to Rourkela immediately to co-ordinate with the Govt. and ‘Shanti Sena’ to pacify the situation.

Again, in 1964, there was a student agitation, which originated from erstwhile Ravenshaw College, and spread across the state. Rama Devi played a major role in negotiating between Student union and Govt. to end the strike. Later she rendered her selfless service to help drought victims of Kalahandi in 1966, flood affected people of Balasore and Mayurbhanja district in September, 1967, victims of devastating cyclone in coastal district of Odisha in October, 1967 and the affected people of drought in 1968 in many districts of Odisha.

In 1975, when Emergency was imposed by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, Rama Devi came forward to protest against it along with other leaders of Odisha, like Hare Krushna Mahatab and Nilamani Routray. When press freedom was curtailed, Rama Devi announced a newspaper with her name to make people aware the words of press freedom among all the citizens. This newspaper was eventually declared unlawful by the government, but Rama stood strong and persuaded the common people to fight against this injustice.

Ramadevi also established a Cancer Detection Centre at Cuttack and a primary school, Shishu Vihar at Cuttack. In 1969, Rama Devi Women’s College in Bhubaneswar, was established in her memory and upgraded to a University in the year 2015. It happens to be the first women's university in eastern region of India. Inside the university campus, there is a museum dedicated to her.



Mahatma Gandhi, was all praise for Rama Devi, after seeing her activities and commented,
"I have marvelled at how Smt. Rama Devi and her girls have discharged themselves during the tour, which was undoubtedly pleasant and easy, had undoubtedly its trials. But these ladies have not known what fatigue is? Nowhere have I seen anything quite like what Smt. Rama Devi and her little band have been found to do so gracefully and so naturally. They have never needed or claimed any special privilege." – Mahatma Gandhi, 1934

5. Maa Rama Devi : A glance into her Life

Maa Rama Devi devoted and rendered many services to the people of Odisha and the nation playing the role of a freedom fighter, social reformer, a patriotic and a symbol of women empowerment . The following table summarises some of important milestones of her life along with her reform activities she had undertaken.

Table No-1: Important events and milestones in the life of Rama Devi.

Year	Event/Activities	Remarks
1914	Married to Gopabandhu Choudhury	Same year she lost her father
1918	Started to weave cotton	Inspired by her uncle Madhusudan Das.
1915	Birth of his First child Manmohan Choudhury	
1917	Birth of second child Annapurna Moharana	She had her 3 rd child in 1919 and the child died in 1921
1921	Gopabandhu Choudhury resigned form job	Both actively participated in freedom movement
1921	Gandhiji's first visit to Odisha, Cuttack	A turning point for Rama Devi
1922	Joined AICC session at Gaya as a representative	Later joined as member of Khadi Board and Charkha Sangh
1922	Became Member of Women Conference	Helped her to gather women members for her continuing reform woks.
1928	Joined AICC session at Gaya as a representative	That inspired women in Odisha to join Congress
1929	Stayed at Alka Ashram	Women member collection for Congress
1930	Active Participation in Salt Satyagraha, President of State Congress Committee, Arrested and sent to Bhagalpur Central jail	Engaged in activities like salt collection from Srijang, Kujanga, Collecting funds for satyagraha , picketing at foreign garment store,
1932	Arrested along with her son and sent to Hazaribag Jail After release, became Secretary of Harijan Sevak Sangha	Indulged in Harijan service activity



1933	Member of Odisha Relief Committee, Establishment of Rastra Bhasha Parchara Samiti	Involved in activities like toilet cleaning, distribution of medicines, training, cleaning of roads, demand of allowing public water facilities to Harijans etc.
1934	One of the organiser for Harijan Padayatra called by Gandhiji	Many women were inspired and joined her
1934-1942	Journey to Bari and Established the Bari Ashram or 'Sebaghara'	Activities like Self Services, Drug De-addiction, Basic Education, Spreading the National Language, leather works, rendering services to Harijans, cleaning the toilets, Adult Education, increasing self-employment of common men through Dairy Development, Bee keeping and delivering health services to the patients, hence earn for their livelihood.
1938	Member of Gandhi Seva Sangha Member of Madhu Smruti	Arrangement of Gandhi Seva Sammilani at Beroboi
1942	Entire Choudhury family got arrested	
1944	Released from jail Member of Wardha Seva Mandal Member of All India Charakha Sangha	Established a hostel for the children of arrested workers. Arranged Training for Grama Seva Worker
1946	Represented Kastruri Ba Gandhi Memorial Trust	By the request of Mahatama Gandhi
1947	Vice-president Red cross society	
1948	Balbadi Teacher Training Centre established, Member of 'Utkal Nav Jeevan Mandal'	As a part of her continuous reform activities
1950	Established Adivasi Seva Kendra at Dumburigeda, Arrangement of 'Nikhila Bhart SarbadoyoSammilani'.	Extensive Adivasi service undertaken
1951	Worked for Famine at Koraput	Arranged for relief at Koraput along with Malati Devi.
1952	Padayatra with Gopabandhu Choudhury as part of Bhudana movement	Around 4000 miles of Padayatra, collected one thousand acre of land and distributed to destitute.
1958	Death of Gopabandhu Choudhury Presided over AICC meeting at Maharastra.	
1958-1959	Established 'Shanti Sena' at Cuttack 'SevaSamiti' at Haridaspur inaugurated	Service work at Bari, Flood relief work



1962	China War begins Established 'Shishu Vihar ' at Cuttack	Travelled to Assam for peace keeping
1964	Communal riot at Rourkela	Worked for peace keeping and also helped to pacify student strike.
1967	Actively worked in relief work during high flood at Balanga	
1968	Ensured relief for drought affected area in eight district of Odisha.	With the help of state and Central govt.
1969	Worked to resolve the dispute among Odia & Bengali at Jambu Worked to resolve the dispute between Hindi-Muslim at Cuttack	Became a symbol of peace following Gandhian Philosophy.
1971-1972	Rendered service to Bangaldeshi immigrants who suffered from epidemic like cholera Also built around 3786 houses for flood affected people	During 1971 war she was very active in providing basic necessities to affected people
1977	Established Acharya Harihara Memorial Cancer Institute at Cuttack	Helping numerous cancer patients across the eastern region of India till date
1981	Felicitated by the Jamunalal Bajaj Foundation with Jamunalal Bajaj Award.	
1984	Conferred with Doctorate (honoris causa) by Utkal University	

Conclusion:

Entire Choudhury family have set an example by involving themselves in dedicated and selfless service to people. Perhaps it's their undaunted courage and uncountable sacrifices that make Indian history, rich and glorious. Maa Rama Devi was honored with several awards for her selfless devotion towards the country and countless sacrifices for its people. She declined several rewards and recognitions declared by the government and other significant organisations. She kept denouncing them and believed in theory that it is an achievements for her continuous service to remove oppression and intrusion. She was felicitated by the Jamunalal Bajaj Foundation in 1981 and received doctorate from Utkal University in 1984.

The services and life of Maa Rama Devi will be an inspiration to each woman of the country. She is continuing to live in the heart of women of Odisha. She neither involved herself in any negative action nor was affected by any sort of criticism in her entire life. It was on 22nd July 1985 that Maa Rama Devi took her last breath at the age of 85. Though she is no more with us, her motherly love and great ideologies will forever be etched in the glorious history of Odisha.



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